

THE GERMAN ORIGINS OF COMMON APPALACHIAN COUNTRY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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The culture of the Appalachian Mountains is so often portrayed as Scots-Irish that the contributions of other ethnic groups is often overlooked. The west African origins of the banjo and the Italian origins of the mandolin are fairly well known, but who thinks of Germany when some American country musician plays an ancient Celtic ballad on the autoharp, or on the "Appalachian" dulcimer or on the hammered dulcimer?

The oldest familiar ancestor of these instruments is known in both this country and in Germany as the 'zither'. Though not played often anymore, museums of mountain culture, such as the Appalachian Village of Norris, Tennessee have specimens on display. They are made with a body or resonator with strings stretched across it, and with no protruding neck. The strings are fretted and plucked. The most common form in Germany is the 'Saltzburg Zither', and the Pennsylvania Germans called it a 'zitter'.

The zither is most often played today in its automated form, the Autoharp. Who can think of the Autoharp without conjuring up images of Momma Maybelle or of Janette Carter flailing away on "Wildwood Flower" ? The music may be in the Scots-Irish tradition, but the instrument was invented by Christian Gütter of Markneukirkchen, Germany in about 1879, where it is known as the 'volkszither', or 'people's zither'. Gütter designed button activated bars that fretted the strings, thus making playing the zither easier for the average person.

The 'Appalachian dulcimer' is descended from the German 'scheitholt', though the shape changed from a long narrow body slightly flared at the base, to one shaped like an attenuated hour glass.

The 'hackbrett' is one of the most common of the folk instruments of southern Germany, or Bavaria. In America we know it as the 'hammered dulcimer'. This instrument has a shallow trapezoidal sound box over which are stretched the strings, which are played by striking them with spoon shaped hammers. A lively metallic sound is produced. It effectively renders airy background music for many a Celtic ballad played by American country musicians.

This melange of musical instruments from Germany with songs and playing styles from Ireland and Scotland within the American Country tradition suggests the obvious, that is that the Appalachian Mountains were settled by many German immigrants who intermingled with the Scots-Irish to produce the American Hillbilly Mountaineer and his culture.